

A. Background

BLM Office: Arctic Field Office LLAKF010

Lease/Serial/Case File No.: FF096614

Applicant: Ron Heintz
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Auke Bay Laboratories
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Proposed Action Title/Type: Oceanographic and Fisheries Surveys / NPR-A Permit (298401)

Dates of Proposed Activity: July 1, 2015 – September 15, 2015

General Location of Proposed Action: Elson Lagoon within the NPR-A

Description of Proposed Action: The applicant, Ron Heintz of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Alaska Fisheries Science Center, has requested authorization for field activity and access to conduct Oceanographic and Fisheries Surveys of Elson Lagoon, within the NPR-A.

The action is the same as NOAA was permitted to conduct last year under permit FF096614. The survey of Elson Lagoon is part of a larger study that includes surveys along the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. The surveys are intended to identify the value of the arctic nearshore as rearing habitat for juvenile fishes. The data would be used as a baseline for identifying climate effects and for developing oil spill response plans.

Survey activities in Elson Lagoon would be focused on two locations: Cooper Island and Plover Point (Figure 1). At each location, they would establish a set of beach seine sites and a series of offshore survey transects. A set of stations arrayed along each offshore transect would be sampled by trawling. A remotely operated vessel would conduct an acoustic survey of the entire area encompassed by the transects at the same time trawling is conducted. At the end of these activities, the currents moving in and out of the lagoon would be measured and mapped using an Acoustic Doppler Current Profiler (ADCP).

There would be beach seine sites associated with each offshore transect where the transect intersects the beach. The sites located near Plover Pt. would be sampled once a week between July 1 and September 15. The sites located on Cooper Island would only be sampled once, the date depends on weather. The beach seine is 37 meters (m) long and it will be deployed from a 12-foot inflatable boat outfitted with a four horsepower motor. Fish caught in the beach seine would be identified, counted and released. Up to 30 individuals from each species would be retained to obtain individual weights, caloric content, aging, diet, and isotopic analysis.

Bottom trawling along the offshore transects would be conducted once during the period between July 15 and August 30, specific dates will depend on weather. Each station along the offshore Transects would be fished once using the trawl and a Seabird model SBE911 CTD. Zooplankton would be collected once along each offshore transect using a 335 µm mesh single ring net. The catch would be sorted and counted and samples of individual fish and benthic invertebrates would be retained for further processing similar to beach seined fish. The beam trawl is a single warp net outfitted with 7 mm mesh and a 4 mm codend liner. A lead line is attached to the 3.05 m beam it fishes a 2.26 m wide. The net would be deployed behind a 43 foot in length vessel (Annika Marie) which is powered by Twin Cummins 5.9 liter engines at 305 horsepower each. Trawling along the Cooper Island transects would occur at the same time as beach seining.

Hydroacoustic surveys would be conducted in concert with the bottom trawling. The hydroacoustic surveys would be conducted from a remotely operated vessel over an area circumscribed by the beach and the most extreme stations on their transect lines. The acoustic instruments include a Simrad EK60 split beam at 120 kHz and a 100 kHz multibeam imaging sonars. The Simrad device is used to collect echo sign of fish in the midwater. The imaging sonar would be used to map bottom types and identify bottom features.

A fine scale oceanographic survey of the currents in Eluitkak and Ekilukuruak Passes would be conducted following the completion of the bottom trawling. Currents would be surveyed using two Acoustic Doppler Current Profilers (ADCPs) operating at 1200 kHz. One of the ADCPs would be mounted on a small remotely operated underwater vehicle (ROV) and the other on the vessel used to reach the passes. For Eluitkak Pass, they plan to use the zodiac used in the beach seining operations. They plan to use the 36-foot launch to sample near Ikilukuruak Pass. The objective is to map movement of water in and out of Elson Lagoon.

The beach seine crews would consist of three people. Trawling and acoustic operations would be conducted from a vessel with five people aboard. The fine scale oceanographic survey would require four people on the 36-foot launch near Ekilukuruak Pass and two when operating near Eluitkak Pass.

Beach seine and oceanographic sites near Plover Point would be accessed by a pair of 4-wheeled all-terrain vehicles (not BLM managed land). Sites on the Plover Islands near the Eluitkak Pass would be reached from Plover Point by a 13-foot, hard hull, inflatable outfitted with a 25 hp motor. The beach seine sites on Cooper Island, all the trawl transects and oceanographic stations near Ikilukuruak Pass would be accessed by BOEM's (BOEM 1273) research vessel. The BOEM vessel is a 36-foot aluminum launch.

No aircraft are proposed for the project, and no field camps are either. Fueling would take place at Barrow. Human waste would not be disposed of in the vicinity of Elson Lagoon. Beach seine operations will typically entail day trips to the sampling locations. The BOEM vessel has a marine head. The BOEM vessel adheres to all appropriate Coast Guard safety requirements. The beach seine crew would be in daily contact with chief scientists. All staff have had cold-water survival training; bear aversion training and firearms safety training. The applicant has an outreach program in place with Barrow and are cooperating with the North Slope Borough on this project.

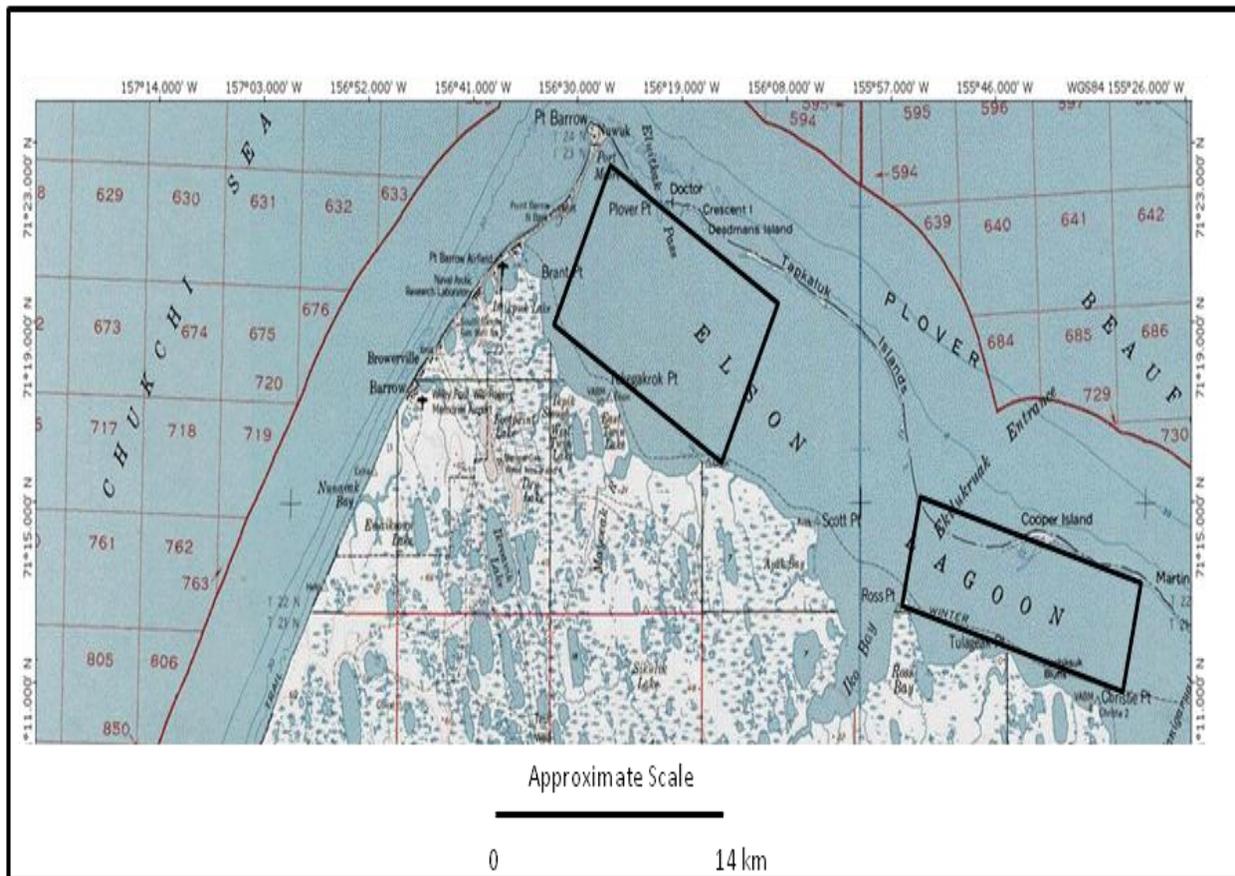


Figure 1: Applicant Supplied Map

Legal Description (Umiat Meridian):

| Township | Range | BLM Managed Area |
|-----------------|--------------|--|
| 23 North | 17 West | 3, 4 , 8-30, 32-36 (Elson Lagoon Only) |
| 23 North | 16 West | 19-21, 28-32 (Elson Lagoon Only) |
| 22 North | 17 West | 1-4, 10-12 (Elson Lagoon Only) |
| 22 North | 16 West | 4-7 (Elson Lagoon Only) |
| 22 North | 15 West | 21-23, 25-28, 32-36 (Elson Lagoon Only) |
| 22 North | 14 West | 27-36 (Elson Lagoon Only) 30 Cooper Island |
| 21 North | 15 West | 1-4 (Elson Lagoon Only) |
| 21 North | 14 West | 1-11, 15-16 (Elson Lagoon Only) |

B. Land Use Plan Conformance

The proposed action is in conformance with the following planning document: National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska Integrated Activity Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (IAP/EIS) dated November 2012 and associated Record of Decision dated February 2013.

The proposed action is in conformance with the Naval Petroleum Reserves Production Act, which allows for the authorization of uses consistent with the purposes of the Act.

C. Compliance with NEPA

The IAP/EIS Record of Decision for the NPR-A developed stipulations and best management practices applicable to all activities in NPR-A. The stipulations and best management practices applicable to the proposed action will be provided, along with project-specific mitigation, to the applicant and are entitled: "FF096614 Ron Heintz NOAA Summer Stipulations 2015".

The Proposed Action is categorically excluded from further documentation under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in accordance with 516 DM 2, Appendix 1, or 516 DM 11.9. Specifically the proposed action meets the criteria for a categorical exclusion under 516 DM 11.9, BLM H-1790-1 National Environmental Policy Act Handbook Appendix 4(F-10) BLM Categorical Exclusions.

"Nondestructive data collection, inventory (including field, aerial, and satellite surveying and mapping), study, research, and monitoring activities."

This categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects that may significantly affect the environment. The proposed action has been reviewed, and none of the extraordinary circumstances described in 516 DM 2 apply.

| Extraordinary Circumstances | Yes | No |
|--|------------|-----------|
| 2.1 Have significant impacts on public health or safety. | | X |
| 2.2 Have significant impacts on such natural resources and unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources; park, recreation or refuge lands; wilderness areas; wild or scenic rivers; national natural landmarks; sole or principal drinking water aquifers; prime farmlands; wetlands (Executive Order 11990); floodplains (Executive Order 11988); national monuments; migratory birds; and other ecologically significant or critical areas. | | X |
| 2.3 Have highly controversial environmental effects or involve unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources [NEPA Section 102(2) (E)]. | | X |
| 2.4 Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks. | | X |
| 2.5 Establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects. | | X |
| 2.6 Have a direct relationship to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant environmental effects. | | X |
| 2.7 Have significant impacts on properties listed, or eligible for listing, on the National Register of Historic Places as determined by either the bureau or | | X |

